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Thesis

NEW ENGLAND'S PROBLEM AND ROBERT FROST'S SOLUTION

By

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The problem of the thesis is 'The Problem of New England'—a problem, or perhaps in a sense a group of inter-related problems, which has emerged in the last hundred years. The problem is seen by many to be that of a land which is no longer productive—either of earth's fruits or of sound people. Writers contend that though Vermont and New Hampshire in their younger days were vigorous, healthy states, peopled by strong, rugged pioneer men and women—that all the good has been displaced by poverty, barren soil, and worst of all, a people maddened by loneliness, inbreeding and isolation. Reasons given for this decline are the drawing power of the large cities, westward expansion, the originally meagre soil, the scattered isolated farms, and the lack of cultural contact with the 'outside world'.

More directly the concern of this thesis is the fact that often in critical estimates the poet Robert Frost has been cited as the most eminent portrayer of this unhappy land, the writer most accurate in his picture of a people without hope, of a civilization dying out. A considerable number of critics see Mr. Frost in this light.

It is partially the purpose of this thesis to present





a representative number of poems which would allow reasonable basis for the above assumptions about New England and Mr. Frost's presentation of New England. But it is the writer's contention that there is another aspect which is equally, if not more important. When people write, as they do, that Frost is all morbidity, that he pictures New England as entirely in a state of decay, degeneration—with all the good blood drained out and nothing but the dregs of humanity left, with insanity and loneliness the order of things and little that is wholesome remaining—then this writer must protest. She has found Mr. Frost a different man—a man who sees that that is unpleasant, unhappy, unjust in life, but a man who sees answers as well. One can see these answers in his lines about the wonder and beauty of Nature; in the many happy, well-adjusted people in his poems; in what he has to say about the value of labor; in the humor that is so much an integral part of him, and that he recommends for the rest of us:

"But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

The writers who call him sceptic have weighty arguments, but there is more to see.

This writer feels that Vermont and New Hampshire have been unjustly criticized, and that Robert Frost has been mistakenly interpreted as solely the poet of a section that has failed. To substantiate this thesis, the writer will present in addition to the poems which give the derogatory critics their basis for judgement, those poems which are representative





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of another aspect of Frost and of New England. This writer feels that Frost not only presents graphically the problems with which the New England farmer must cope, but that Frost has solutions too, and that he presents people who are working out these solutions in their own lives as he has in his.

The thesis divides itself logically into four chapters: an explanatory introduction, a chapter on the problematic side of northern New England as presented in Frost, a chapter on the solutions this and other writers have seen in Frost's poems, and a conclusion which will attempt to assimilate the materials presented and indicate where the estimate reasonably falls in the light of research and study of the poet's words. The two central chapters will commence with a substantial review of what other writers have noted in Frost that is pertinent to the subject, and then each chapter will continue with numerous illustrations from Frost's poetry which seem illustrative of the two aspects of his writing.

This writer has been told that Mr. Frost is troubled because people tend to read too much into his poetry, and try to indicate bases for ideas and philosophies that he never intended. For one example, a college professor has taught his classes that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a description of a man contemplating suicide--an interpretation that is rather hard to accept. In any interpretations here made this writer has tried to cling as closely as possible to





just what is said in the poems. It would be self-deception to feel that one could thereby get all and yet only the poet's thought, because a person's reaction to every word is of necessity colored and influenced by his own experiences--this writer reads Frost with all of her personal life behind her, and therefore her reactions are at least a little different from anyone else who reads Frost, and somewhat different too, certainly, from what he himself intended. All this is inevitable, and may well be a handicap to an interpretation, though it is certainly no detriment to enjoyment and participation, for every bit of past experience that has bearing on what Mr. Frost writes about makes appreciation of him relatively deeper. This writer has spent many months in New England-- her people still dwell back in the green hills and tiny towns of Vermont-- and for her no happier existence than living out one's life in New England is conceivable; with such a background the writer feels a right to claim some sympathy with the places and people the poet deals most with. Amy Lowell writes, "Mr. Robinson represents New England, Mr. Frost is New England."<sup>1</sup> She has expressed much of his worth in those words.

True there is a problem--life on a back-road farm has long, lonely winters, real desert places; but it is not the unsolvable riddle some writers would have us think. Frost

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<sup>1</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917. p. 80.





does not present a hopeless picture of a section all gone to rot. He shows rather the answers that these people have found to their problem. It is their answer to their loneliness, and his answer for his own life, and may serve for any reader who has the need and wishes to make the application.

In this chapter we shall look on New England, that New England, as all men, this is the view some writers and some other less biased people would have us take, and it must be admitted that there is real justification for seeing New England in that light--in saying that it has sections that have shed its day, its good to seed, that it is good, vital, and invigorating drained out to more productive grounds. What is left is the drab of monotony, shelling in isolation, rigid poverty, degradation, loneliness. Farmers are bogged up in their isolated rows--with no knowledge of, or desire for anything that is of value in the outside world. The whole of life is drabness, the same laboriousness seen and repeated--ending and increasing drabness. A man and his wife see no brighter future than working themselves into their graves, and leaving their children to work out the same existence on long since worn-out land.

It is a case of man against the elements. A farmer puts everything of himself into his land, and then sees his profits miserably lost in a matter of minutes through storm, fire or blight. Often death takes a horrible aspect that city dwellers cringe at and cannot accept. The virile young men of





## CHAPTER II

### NEW ENGLAND'S PROBLEM

In this chapter we shall look on New England, Frost's New England, as all bad. This is the view some critics and some other less biased people would have us take, and it must be admitted that there is real justification for seeing New England in that light--in saying that it is a section that has seen its day, has gone to seed, with all that is good, vital, and invigorating drained out to more productive grounds. What is left is the dregs of humanity, dwelling in squalor, rigid poverty, degradation, loneliness. Farmers are cooped up in their isolated farms--with no knowledge of, or desire for anything that is of value in the 'outside world'. The whole of life is drudgery, the same dreadful round of labor--never-ending and increasingly dreary. A man and his wife see no brighter future than 'working themselves into their graves', and leaving their children to work out the same existence on long since worn-out land.

It is a case of man against the elements. A farmer puts everything of himself into his land, and then sees his profits irrevocably lost in a matter of minutes through storm, fire or blight. Often death takes a horrible aspect that city dwellers cringe at and cannot accept. The virile young son of





the family, joyous in his prime, is cut off in an instant when he slips and falls across the spinning circular saw. A farmer takes an unaccustomed stroll through his fields, leans against the barbed wire fence. A sudden storm has knocked a wire against the fence down the line a way, the farmer dies swiftly.

Frost has the right, if any one does, of portraying New England as the section we have just described. He knows, with the greatest possible intimacy, every aspect of a New England farmer's life. A significant proportion of his life has been spent on one farm or another in New Hampshire and Vermont.

It is easy enough to let one's opinion of New England farm life color one's view of the biographical aspect of Frost's poetry—that is, the influence of his experiences evident in his poetry. Amy Lowell sees Frost's own life as one great battle against environment. She infers that while this might have been the downfall of a different man, it serves to be Frost's inspiration. But her main thought is that the farmer's life is all struggle; grim, heart-breaking, meagrely-rewarded toil.

Kingston, Frost's father's birthplace, is in Rockingham County, and not many miles to the north of Derry. In buying Robert a farm in Derry, therefore, Mr. William Frost was merely in a measure returning upon his own life. But returns are dangerous things. The whole farming industry of New England had been knocked on the head by the opening up of the West. The enterprising youths of these country districts had gone to make their fortunes on the stretching meadows of the western plains. To start life





in San Francisco and work back to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, would have been retrogression indeed for anyone with a less special destiny than Mr. Frost. Here was a young man, 25 years old, whose horizon since he was 10 had been bounded by Hanover on the north and Boston on the south, only a few 100 miles either way. Here was this same young man working from morning to night to tear a living out of thin soil. Yet, however despairing the outlook seemed, this was the very concatenation of circumstance and surrounding that the poet needed. A few 100 miles was to contain all his poetic world, but these few 100 miles were to be deepened indefinitely by the delving of his own spade.<sup>1</sup>

Miss Lowell has long been leader of the pack who cry that Frost writes of a New England that is dead and decaying. She sees New England farm life as a hopeless situation, and has discovered many who agree with her and say so in their critical estimation of Frost. Though she was among the first to recognize Frost's outstanding qualities, she was the first as well to see a grim portrayal of life as the all-pervading import of Frost's work. In her review of North of Boston she could only write:

North of Boston is a very sad book. All the sadder, perhaps, because the poet is at no pains to make it so. He is holding no brief for or against the state of things he portrays, he is too much a part of it himself to exhibit it as an illustration of anything. He writes of it because it is his, his to love and present. Yet, in spite of its author's sympathetic touch, the book reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of our New England life, at least in its rural communities.

What is there in the hard, vigorous climate of these states which plants the seeds of degeneration? Is the violence and ugliness of their religious belief the cause of these twisted and tortured lives? Have the sane, full-blooded men all been drafted away to the cities, or the

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Frost, The Man and His Work. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 19 . p. 3.





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West, leaving behind only feeble remainders of a once fine stock? The question again demands an answer after reading Mr. Frost's book.<sup>2</sup>

And there is a considerable group of critics who seem convinced that realistic and vivid as Frost's characterizations are, they are descriptions of peculiar and restricted people found nowhere but in the confines of the New England hills; a sort of 'missing-link' between modern civilization and the aboriginal savages.

G. R. Elliott spoke of their "narrow and unrelieved lives"<sup>3</sup>; Grant C. Knight said: "Mr. Frost is compelled to speak of blighted lives, of defeated hopes"<sup>4</sup>; Caroline Ford called Frost's New England, "the scene of a diminishing farm population,.....one where fear and poverty form the axis of many lives.....a region inhabited by many unhappy individuals"<sup>5</sup>; T. K. Whipple suggested: "Even his people are etchings or woodcuts--droll, bizarre, sometimes pathetic"<sup>6</sup>; John Farrar

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<sup>2</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917. p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>The Nation, Vol 109:2840. Cited by Richard Thornton in Recognition of Robert Frost; 25 th Anniversary. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1937. p. 190.

<sup>4</sup>American Literature and Culture. New York: Roy Long and Richard Smith, Inc., 1932. p. 469.

<sup>5</sup>The Less Travelled Road, Harvard University Press, 1935. Cited by Thornton, Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>6</sup>Spokesmen: Modern Writers & American Life, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 213.





considered his whole body of writing illustrative of a decaying and degenerating New England"<sup>7</sup>; Alfred Kreymborg, speaking of Frost, wrote: "Nor did moribund New England, with its deserted farms and broken or stunted people, impress him with total tragedy."<sup>8</sup> Bruce Weirick called it "a tired civilization going to seed," and added, "Life here has lost its...meaning. It is but a vacillation between the hard-tack view that 'good fences make good neighbors' and an imagination brooding on death, and shattering itself in futility or insanity."<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant wrote of the "spare human figures moving across Frost's New England landscape."<sup>10</sup>

Clement Wood declared that "the old New England....died of a transfusion of its best blood to the...West." Frost's characters, he added, are the "sparse human backwaters" of this old New England, "starving into the asylum or the cemetery." "The effect of Frost's stories," he continued, "is that they are largely pointless: which merely points to the fact that he is the unleaved laureate of a people living and dying pointlessly."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>anonymous sketches edited by John Farrar, cited by Thornton, Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>8</sup>Our Singing Strength, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p.234.

<sup>9</sup>From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939. pp. 183-89.

<sup>10</sup>Fire Under the Andes, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p.152.

<sup>11</sup>Poets of America. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1925. pp. 143, 156.





W. H. Auden remarked:

Frost returns again and again to the odd country character, to the deranged, to the unsuccessful, to those who do not live by the ordinary standards of material profit.<sup>12</sup>

Percy Boynton has written of Frost's characters that they are "products of duress and adversity. They live in a country which has come to old age on arid tradition. They are unacquainted with song or play."<sup>13</sup> He added: "Hard pride and grim endurance have lined their faces, labor has bowed their backs, and inbreeding has done the rest."<sup>14</sup>

He considered them the same people as Whittier had described one hundred years before:

Church-goers, fearful of the unseen Powers,  
But grunting over pulpit tax and pew-rent,  
Saving, as shrewd economists, their souls  
And winter pork, with the least possible outlay  
Of salt and sanctity; in daily life  
Showing as little actual comprehension  
Of Christian charity and love and duty  
As if the Sermon on the Mount had been  
Out-dated like a last year's almanac.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Jonathan Cape editions, Selected Poems, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 297.

<sup>13</sup>Some Contemporary Americans, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924. p. 44.

<sup>14</sup>op. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 45.





Paul Engle said of these people of Frost's New England:

They had lived on the same land till the life was sucked out of it and the plough harvested only rocks, and the barns had wooden cages in the darkest corners where the minds that had cracked under in-breeding and the lonely, repressive life in remote valleys,.... gibbered their lives away.<sup>16</sup>

Even Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, a native New Englander, and friend and student of Robert Frost, could not but write of the loneliness that he feels is tangible in the New England scene. "It is a strangely changed New England from the one Whittier knew when he walked the Crystal Hills of New Hampshire looking for bright legends of the Sokokis. It is sometimes lonelier than when the Indians held it. A Place where much living has been and is no longer there is lonelier than a virgin wilderness."<sup>17</sup>

Coffin's interpretation of Frost is that this changed and lonely New England has had profound effect on its inhabitants. The very fibre of their lives is gripped, influenced by the isolation of their existence. They too are changing.

In these northern farmlands that are becoming forests, where houses grow fewer year by year, strange changes come over the people that have stayed. Staying is the word Frost uses for it, not living. A woman

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<sup>16</sup>Jonathan Cape edition, Selected Poems, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 305.

<sup>17</sup>New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938. p. 304.





listens to the branch of a pine tree against her window,  
a wild branch that has no business to be there where a  
tame branch should be. It is more than a symbol; the  
fears of Frost's people are more than such conventional  
things. This is a thing that can get inside a brain and  
grow:<sup>18</sup>

She had no saying dark enough  
For the dark pine that kept  
Forever trying the window-latch  
Of the room where they slept.

The tireless but ineffectual hands  
That with every futile pass  
Made the great tree seem as a little bird  
Before the mystery of glass!

It never had been inside the room,  
And only one of the two  
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream  
Of what the tree might do.<sup>19</sup>

People living in this new northern New England  
loneliness may fall to odd rituals of behavior.<sup>20</sup>

Always—I tell you this they learned—  
Always at night when they returned  
To the lonely house from far away  
To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,  
They learned to rattle the lock and key  
To give whatever might chance to be  
Warning and time to be off in flight:  
And preferring the out- to the in-door night,  
They learned to leave the house-door wide  
Until they had lit the lamp inside.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>19</sup>R. P. Coffin, Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>20</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. New York:  
Halcyon House, 1939. p. 160.

<sup>21</sup>R. P. Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Robinson  
& Frost. P. 21.





This is how Coffin would describe one kind of New England tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

There is a sadness in the very fact of decline in population in the New England states, in that the decline brings with it the inevitable abandonment of farms, allowing the land to go back to Nature.

So it goes, too, with the farms all over northern New England. The White Mountains and the Green have grown back into their ancient extent. They have pushed the farms off their knees and taken back their green and ancient children. Frost knows the tragedy of tame land going back to the wild. He writes often of coming upon houses lost in the mountains.<sup>23</sup>

Amy Lowell paints a more harsh picture of the same thing.

Here are the huge hills, undraped by any sympathetic legend, felt as things hard and unyielding, almost sinister, not exactly feared, but regarded as in some sort influences nevertheless. Heavy thunder-storms drench the lonely roads and spatter on the walls of farmhouses rotting in abandonment; and the modern New England town, with narrow frame houses, visited by drummers alone, is painted in all its ugliness.<sup>24</sup>

Louis Untermeyer feels that this grim New England is but a background, against which Frost portrays human drama.

In North of Boston Frost found his own full utterance and himself. It is, as he call it, a "book of people." And it is more than that. It is a book of a people, of the folk of New England, of New England itself with its hard hills and harder certainties, its repressions, its

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<sup>22</sup>R. P. Coffin, Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>23</sup>op. cit.

<sup>24</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Ibid. p. 107





cold humor and inverted tenderness. Against this background, Frost has placed some of the most poignant and dramatic poems that the age has produced, perhaps the most authentic and powerful that have ever come out of America.<sup>25</sup>

Coffin sees that there are all the elements of normal living in Frost, and that grief and fear are among them. He sees them as essential to life, and to this poetry.

A man doing small farming has great friends at his elbow: the seasons, frost and rain, night and day, and others, too. Not the great aristocratic friends in books, preaching perfection, but the great commoners who teach a man how to get along: gladness, compassion, fear, grief, "he-ness," to bring out the "sheness" in a mate; good neighbors for a man who does not want to be alone, or grow out of the real world into one he has to build for himself. Frost does not always call these friends by name. In his fear of absolutes, he often avoids naming even next-door neighbors like grief and compassion. But he doesn't need to name them. They are there.<sup>26</sup>

We cannot but feel that the overwhelming voice of these critics would have us see an unlovely New England, peopled by those who have degenerated with her. They base their judgements on their own experience, and on their reading of Frost. It must be admitted that Frost gives them some basis for these opinions.

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\* <sup>25</sup>The New Era in American Poetry. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1919. p. 22.

<sup>26</sup>New Poetry of New England: Robinson & Frost, Ibid. p. 53.





16

"A Servant to Servants" has probably been the poem of Frost's most frequently quoted to illustrate the morbid loneliness of the New England back-country, and the half-crazed creatures who live there.

The woman who speaks has had frightening experiences in her childhood which prey on her mind to such an extent that she just must talk about them to anyone who will listen.

I didn't make you know how glad I was  
To have you come and camp here on our land.

I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.<sup>27</sup>

Many readers will assume that insanity is a hereditary trait in her family, because she admits that:

My father's brother wasn't right. They kept him  
Locked up for years back there at the old farm.  
I've been away once—yes, I've been away.  
The State Asylum.<sup>28</sup>

And Amy Lowell concludes that "A Servant to Servants" is about a once insane woman almost becoming insane again,<sup>29</sup> while Untermeyer calls it a quiet and terrible study of insanity, the dull degeneration of a life that was already dragged down.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost, Ibid. pp. 82, 87.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. P. 84.

<sup>29</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. Ibid. P. 124.

<sup>30</sup>American Poetry Since 1900. P. 26.





The image which dwells in the woman's mind is that of the cage in the barn in which her uncle was kept.

...they made the place comfortable with straw,  
Like a beast's stall, to ease their consciences.  
Of course they had to feed him without dishes.  
They tried to keep him clothed, but he paraded  
With his clothes on his arm—all of his clothes.<sup>31</sup>

This is the tangible thing that bothers her but it would seem that the greatest tragedy of this woman's life is one that she hardly recognizes. True the past preys on her mind, but she can see a certain reasonableness in it nonetheless.

Cruel—it sounds. I 'spose they did the best  
They knew.<sup>32</sup>

But the thing that probably has, and may again force her to insanity is the lack of understanding in her husband. He is of the lamentable New England type who think it a sign of weakness for a man to show grief, or love, or appreciation. These are the kind of men whose wives die of neglect, and their husbands never know why. His wife says:

He looks on the bright side of everything,  
Including me. He thinks I'll be all right  
With doctoring. But it's not medicine--  
It's rest I want. . . . .  
. . . . . from doing  
Things over and over that just won't stay done.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost, Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>32</sup>op. cit.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. p. 83.





12

Her husband has a world that is satisfying, stimulating—  
making his dreams and plans for a tourist camp come true is  
engrossing. His work has a goal, and there is some hope of  
achieving the goal. Her work is nothing but a never-ending  
round of drudgery.

He's into everything in town. This year  
It's highways.<sup>34</sup>

But she has no other companionship than the lake, the four  
hired men—"great good-for-nothings"—, and the few people  
who stop for a time at their camp and will listen to her  
troubles for a passing minute. She needs stimulation,  
appreciation, some feeling that what she is doing is worth-  
while. Her husband, in his practical way, thought that their  
moving from her old surroundings would help, but because her  
problem is deeper than just the influences of the past, this  
has not availed.

Somehow the change wore out like a prescription.  
And there's more to it than just window-views  
And living by a lake. I'm past such help—  
I 'spose I've got to go the road I'm going:<sup>35</sup>

She can for~~see~~ see no solution, and there really is none, with her  
husband's nature what it is. He will probably never see what  
it is she needs to make her life normal, livable, satisfying.  
She will just go on living her life as "A Servant to Servants".

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. p. 86.





"Home Burial" is another of the critics' favorites in the list of the morbid and tragic. Untermeyer calls it "a domestic tragedy that is the more terrible since nothing happens."<sup>36</sup> It deals with the morbidness of death in the remote places of New England— a woman unable to take up her life again after her only child has died. Lowell feels the poem is a ghastly indictment of the small family "only too common, alas! throughout New England,"<sup>37</sup> but I think that any one who has lived in the New England farm country would find just the opposite true, and small families very much in the minority. But Edward Garnett has paid fitting tribute to this poem when he said: "I say unhesitatingly that for tragic poignancy this piece stands by itself in American poetry."<sup>38</sup>

In the poem, the child dies, and the loneliness, the emptiness, the horror, unsettle the mother's mind. Some critics feel that, as in "A Servant to Servants", it is the woman's hopeless drudgery of housework that makes it impossible for her to re-adjust after her loss. "The father has at least the healthiness of work amid the constantly changing seasons to sustain him but the mother has only her dull round of household tasks."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>American Poetry Since 1900. Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>37</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup>Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 116:2, pp.214-224 (Aug. 1915)  
Cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>39</sup>Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. P 116.





But other writers feel that it is more a difference in outlook that has caused the woman's breakdown and estrangement from her husband. The man is country-bred. To her he seemed calloused as she saw him:

'Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.'<sup>40</sup>

But the farm was his inherited home, and the burial ground an important and cherished part of it. To the man it was the sweetest possible service to his child to make a place of rest for him there. The woman's feelings were different. She had no ties with the past in the little graveyard; to her it was a sight that inspired fear and terror, and a sight 'So small the window frames the whole of it'<sup>41</sup> that she must see every time she passes up and down the stair.

The woman, in her greatest need, could find no basis for sympathetic understanding from her husband, because she could not accept his reaction to the death.

'You could sit there with the stains on your shoes  
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave  
And talk about your everyday concerns.'

I can repeat the very words you were saying.  
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 71

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. p. 69

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. p. 72





In her greatest need for solace she felt she was deserted, because her reactions to death were not his. She expected that the event would justify open grieving, talking with the neighbors about it, venting of her sorrow through expressed emotions. But instead her husband talked with his neighbor about birch fences. His was a different code, that of meeting bereavement with courage, of keeping up 'a decent front' when with outsiders, of letting the common things of life soothe his pain. His comparative ease of adjustment made it the more difficult for him to understand her prolonged brooding, and they grew farther and farther apart in their misunderstanding. There seemed but little hope of a reconciliation in such a situation. In her complete absorption in her own grief, she failed to understand her husband's love for her, and their greater need for each other. He had to bear the double loss of his son's life, and his wife's love and companionship.

"The Fear", because of its inconclusive ending, has allowed critics a great field for conjecture, and additional means for proving Frost morbid and queer. It would seem that sane reading of the poem would allow of no more interpretation than the following situation. A woman who has left her husband to live with another man is constantly haunted by the fear that the husband will follow her. Coming home on a dark night she is startled by a stranger on the road.





Her fears have built her up to such a degree that she is sure it is her husband. When conversation with the intruder reveals that he is merely a passer-by and all is safe, she tries to cover up her error, and then faints with relief.

Since the ending is merely this:

. . . She spoke as if she couldn't turn.  
The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,  
It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.<sup>43</sup>

there is grantedly room for argument as to what actually happened. Amy Lowell makes 'a bloody melodrama' of it.

"The woman takes the lantern and goes down the road, refusing to let Joel go with her. There she comes face to face with her first husband:"<sup>44</sup>

'You see,' the voice said.

'Oh.' She looked and looked.

'You don't see—I've a child here by the hand.  
A robber wouldn't have his family with him.'

'What's a child doing at this time of night—?'

'Out walking. Every child should have the memory  
Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk.  
What, son?'

'Then I should think you'd try to find  
Somewhere to walk—'

'The highway, as it happens—  
We're stopping for the fortnight down at Dean's.'

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid. p. 116.

<sup>44</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. P. 121.





'But if that's all—Joel—you realize—  
You won't think anything. You understand?  
You understand that we have to be careful.  
This is a very, very lonely place.  
Joel!' She spoke as if she couldn't turn.  
The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,  
It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.<sup>45</sup>

Does he kill her, or does she merely think that he is going  
to do so? Which one is crazed, he or she? Either way,  
Nature has taken her toll."<sup>46</sup>

Miss Lowell is prone to read things sordid and evil  
into Frost's poetry. Her interpretation hardly seems justified  
here. Both the fact that the woman's terror is seen building  
up to the breaking point in the process of the poem, and also  
her suggested reason for her husband's return: "Oh, but you  
see he hadn't had enough—" <sup>47</sup>, contributed to the much more  
likely interpretation that the woman fainted from the relief  
of knowing that it hadn't been the person she had expected.

"An Old Man's Winter Night" gives a pathetic and  
touching picture of lonely old age. Untermeyer says that:  
"It is only by inflection, scarcely by implication, that one  
gets the empty loneliness of all old men and the cold darkness

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<sup>45</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 116.

<sup>46</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. pl 121.

<sup>47</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 114.





of all outdoors,"<sup>48</sup> yet it would seem that lines like the following are typical of loneliness and old age everywhere;

What kept him from remembering the need  
That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
He stood with barrels round him—at a loss.  
And having scared the cellar under him  
In clomping there, he scared it once again  
In clomping off;<sup>49</sup>

A light he was to no one but himself  
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,<sup>50</sup>

The sadness of it is that such an existence should be necessary. How horribly lonely! Some writers say that this is a typical New England scene. That many are the farms where the aged generation has been abandoned by the younger, left to watch the trees creep closer to the house year by year, while the young strong youths are off in the city, exploring more exciting realms. This writer cannot agree that the situation is so wide-spread as to deserve the appellation 'typical', though grantedly it is happening today to some poor bewildered old people. They can do little better than the neglected man of the poem:

One aged man—one man—can't keep a house,  
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
It's thus he does it of a winter night.<sup>51</sup>

It is a tragedy of New England that such must be the case for anyone.

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49 Ibid. p. 135

50 op. cit.

51 op. cit.





"The Census-Taker" treats of this same theme of a land deserted. On a solitary errand the Census-taker talks to himself, as lonely New Englanders often do. He is taking census in an abandoned rural district, and happens on an "empty slab-built, black-paper-covered house of one room and one window and one door,"<sup>49</sup> and as he leaves he declares:

'The place is desert and let whoso lurks  
In silence, if in this he is aggrieved,  
Break silence now or be forever silent.  
Let him say why it should not be declared so.'<sup>52</sup>

The Census-taker, whom one might think of as a rather calloused, methodical, balnd person, turns out to be deeply touched by the aspect of:

'The only dwelling in a waste cut over  
A hundred square miles round it in the mountains;  
And that not dwelt in now by men or women.'<sup>53</sup>

He feels that:

This house in one year fallen to decay  
Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses  
Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years  
Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

The melancholy of having to count souls  
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year  
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.  
It must be I want life to go on living.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 216.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid. pl. 217.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid. p. 217. of Robert Frost. p. 79.





"Blueberries" treats lightly of a family typical not just of New England, but of many sections of our country. They are the type who 'live off the land' and feel that they have a perfect right to do so. In this instance the family is apparently not absolutely destitute, since they are able to afford a horse:

...who should come by, with a democrat-load  
Of all the young chattering Lorens alive,  
But Loren, the fatherly, out for a drive.<sup>55</sup>

But with so many in the family, Loren finds it an easy way of providing to partake of the bounty the berry fields have to offer. He is so practiced at the art of making off with berries that there have grown up near legends about him in the neighboring country-side.

'He seems to be thrifty; and hasn't he need,  
With the mouths of all those young Lorens to feed?  
He has brought them all up on wild berries, they say,  
Like birds. They store a great many away.  
They eat them the year round, and those they don't eat  
They sell in the store and buy shoes for their feet.'<sup>56</sup>

Very probably Loren could find some better means of provision for his flock, but in a land where thrift has had to be practiced for so many many generations, it seems the most natural thing to him to grasp the nearest and cheapest source of existence. And poverty, whether imagined or real, does not make people generous; it makes them grasping and selfish; it

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<sup>55</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. P. 79.

<sup>56</sup>op. cit.





turns their every thought to "getting" and allows them no opportunity for learning the joy of giving. He has pilfered the open berry fields for so many years that he feels they belong to him, and he resents any one else who presumes to pick there.

They won't be too friendly—they may be polite—  
To people they look on as having no right  
To pick where they're picking.<sup>57</sup>

Though existence on a New-England farm often necessitates rigid economies, Loren has allowed the virtue to become a vice. It is the controlling factor of his life.

"The Star Splitter" pictures a man who, if he were a real farmer, might well go down as one of the best examples of a New Englander gone berserk. He cared so little for his land and his home that he up and burned the house down one night, just to get the insurance money. A true farmer would certainly have been insane to do such a thing, but Brad McLaughlin was no farmer. Just as Frost, on his first farm, milked his cows in the middle of the night in order to be able to sleep late in the morning, so this man was always:

Busy outdoors by lantern-light with something  
I should have done by daylight, and indeed  
After the ground is frozen, I should have done  
Before it froze,<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 81.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid. p. 218.





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He had no hand for farming, and no taste for it. However, he had something on his mind which was much more interesting, so

He burned his house down for the fire insurance  
And spent the proceeds on a telescope  
To satisfy a life-long curiosity  
About our place among the infinities.<sup>59</sup>

"The Figure in the Doorway", if he be a New Englander, has an existence that is indisputably cut-off, isolated from the world. He might well seem the hollow product of a decaying civilization, for Frost writes that he is "grim and gaunt". However, this was not due to the way he lived:

The miles and miles he lived from anywhere  
Were evidently something he could bear.  
He stood unshaken, and if grim and gaunt,  
It was not necessarily from want.<sup>60</sup>

He has enough to provide for his physical needs—wood for fuel, a hen, a pig, a well, and a garden patch. The passing train is evidently all the company and entertainment he wants. He is not at odds with the world, for he has chosen this life of his own free will. It would seem that the tragedy of his existence lies in the fact that he is utterly useless to others. If purpose is your excuse for being, this man is pathetic; but if you accept the premise that every man has a right to choose his own mode of existence so long as he does not trespass on the rights of others, then this man is as well adjusted as any of us.

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<sup>59</sup>op. cit.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. p. 378.





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The miller of "The Vanishing Red" fully deserves the worst the critics can say; "half-mad", "ignorant", "sadistic", "crazed", or any other. He kills an Indian on pathetically minor provocation, and he looks on the affair as entirely his own business:

'Whose business,—if I take it on myself,  
Whose business—but why talk round the barn?—  
When it's just that I hold with getting a thing  
done with.<sup>61</sup>

but murder can find no justification in personal opinion.

Frost intimates that the town people thought there must have been a quarrel between the two that justified the death. But:

You'd have to have been there and lived it.  
Then you wouldn't have looked on it as just a matter  
Of who began it between the two races.<sup>62</sup>

The miller held no brief for the redskin race, and he felt no compunction about eliminating the one last member of it in Acton just because:

Some guttural exclamation of surprise  
The Red Man gave in poking about the mill  
Over the great big thumping shuffling mill-stone  
Disgusted the Miller physically as coming  
From one who had no right to be heard from.<sup>63</sup>

Why his prejudice carried him to such radical ends we do not know, but much the same thing has happened in other section of our country to other people whose complexions were not white.

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid. p. 179

<sup>62</sup>op. cit.

<sup>63</sup>op. cit.





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In "The Death of The Hired Man" the old worker has accomplished little in this life. His most earnest sympathizers can only call him "undependable", "worthless". Untermeyer says: "a worn-out incompetant".<sup>64</sup> But Frost's treatment is one of sympathy for a man who did the best he knew. Weak-willed, uneducated, he had little hope of ever achieving much. Happily (or unhappily, as you will) he never fully realized his inadequacy:

'Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—  
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.  
He never did a thing so very bad.  
He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
As anybody!<sup>65</sup>

It wasn't the life he was a part of that made him what he was, but rather his own qualities that determined his poor lot. Weirick found in "The Death of the Hired Man" a picture of:

The narrow hopeless terms on which New England  
consents to give her farm laborers life and death.  
...Man tied to a meanness and the soil...One has a  
sense that we are all like that, just hired men who  
live and die on a grudging bounty, and...amount to nothing.  
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But it is hard to find an acceptable basis for this pessimistic view of the poem. Frost has given as clear a description of Warren and Mary, a very normal, well-adjusted, moderately successful farm couple, as he has of the hired man; though

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<sup>64</sup>Modern American Poetry, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935 p. 254

<sup>65</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 54

<sup>66</sup>Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg, c. p. 201.





perhaps not as vividly defined as that of the hired man. Even Silas is not described as the product of "New England's narrow, hopeless terms."

Silas tried to the end to preserve his self-respect. He is an excellent example of rural New England's attitude toward maintaining one's independence.

'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.'<sup>67</sup>

It was his futile struggle to avoid admitting to himself what he knew everyone else thought—that he had been a failure—that made the old man appear pathetic. Mary sensed it and determined to save him if she could. When Warren demanded to know if Silas had promised to ditch the meadow for him, as he had promised often before, Mary replied:

'Of course he did. What would you have him say?  
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man,  
Some humble way to save his self-respect!'<sup>68</sup>

Amy Lowell's description of Silas as "a poor, half-crazed old labourer"<sup>69</sup> does not seem justified by anything Frost has said concerning him. He was rather an ordinary old man, whose life, for some reason he didn't understand, had been one long series of inconsequential failures; nothing

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<sup>67</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 49.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid. pl 50.

<sup>69</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Ibid. p. 112.





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that he could put his finger on and say, "Here, I made my mistake," but just a vague realization that whatever he had done had never turned out quite as he had thought it would.

"The Hill Wife". This group of poems, in which Frost has described the loneliness of a young wife on an isolated farm, has been one of the strong arguments for the accusation that Frost's characters are half-mad fragments of a decaying country civilization.

As the woman in "The Fear", this woman also felt that rattling the key in the door, when they returned after dark, was:

To give whatever might chance to be  
Warning and time to be off in flight.<sup>70</sup>

The terrified loneliness of the hill wife, her fear of entering her house after dark, the sinister interpretation she attached to the tramp's smile, and her terrified dreams of the purposeful grasping of the pine tree beside the window, suggested that she was a city-bred girl to whom the strangeness of the country made everything seem dreadful.

She was not used to the silence of a farmhouse when the men are away in the fields. The rustling pine by the window, which would have comforted country people with its soft whispers, became restless fingers, trying to open the

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid. p. 160





window latch to her bedroom.

Her life became so filled with fear that she followed her husband to his work in the fields. Under such distracting terror it was not strange that when she stepped into the woods out of his sight to pick an alder branch, her mind should suddenly let go its lasthold to sanity, and drive her into wild flight.

Sudden and swift and light as that  
The ties gave,  
And he learned of finalities  
Besides the grave.<sup>71</sup>

It is impossible to deny that to some women, the country is a place of terrifying loneliness; or that the isolation of country farms is more destructive to women than to men.

Kreisman calls "Out, Out—" the theme of typical Greek tragedy. Circumstances gather to crush people who have done nothing to bring such catastrophe upon themselves.<sup>72</sup> The boy "doing a man's work, though a child at heart,"<sup>73</sup> had worked all the day at the saw-rig, giving little thought, as is a farmer's wont, to the danger that was there. But his involuntary movement when his Sister called "Supper"

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid. p. 162

<sup>72</sup>The Recent New England Pulitzer Prize Winners—Coffin, Frost, Hillyer; Boston University Library, 1943. P. 80.

<sup>73</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 171.





was all that was needed for the tragedy. How we feel with Frost:

Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.<sup>74</sup>

The shock of his severed hand was greater than the boy could stand, "and that ended it."<sup>75</sup> And, as in "Home Burial":

. . . they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.<sup>76</sup>

It seems heartless, but when people work with danger, they cannot afford to dwell on accidents. Such brooding breeds timidity and more catastrophes.

But there is more than that to Frost, the man, and to his poetry. When we ask the question, we hear:

Like James, and like Shakespeare too, Frost knows that the world can need of both the tender-minded and the tough-minded. He is both. You will find, in an evening, in an hour, with him that he can be happy, playful, and intolerant; gentle, pathetic and wise. There are two sides of his face as artist, no camera can catch: a set, lined, wrinkled, granite view, and a gentle, soft, intellectual view—a sort of blindness's face, with blue eyes deep-set under bushy brows, child-like and innocent, but, as you look again, penetrating and shrewd.

And as regards his poetry, there are several things to be considered before a final judgment can be reached on

his work.<sup>74</sup>op. cit. should be taken into account. The full

of the <sup>75</sup>Ibid. p. 172 last chapter to illustrate the

<sup>76</sup>op. cit.

Source, *Streams, The Wholeness of Robert Frost, The*  
*Wentworth-Sexton Review* Vol. 18, no. 31 pp. 416-18 July 1931





### CHAPTER III

#### ROBERT FROST'S SOLUTION

The weight of so much that is depressing, morbid, and seemingly futile, might all go to make one accept whole cloth the judgment that this is the main burden of Frost's work. Certainly a person who read only the previous chapter would come away convinced that here was a poet who spoke out of a tragic background. The evidence would seem strong for the critics who see Frost as a sceptical, disillusioned man.

But there is more than that to Frost, the man, and to his poetry. When we ask the man who knows, we hear:

Like James, and like Shakespeare too, Frost knows that the world has need of both the tender-minded and the tough-minded. He is both. You will find, in an evening, in an hour, with him that he can be harsh, impish, and intolerant; gentle, estholic and wise. There are two views of his face no artist, no camera can catch: a set, lined, wrinkled, granite view, and a gentle, soft, whimsical view—a sort of blindman's face, with blue eyes deep-set under shaggy brows, child-like and innocent, but, as you look again, penetrating and shrewd.<sup>1</sup>

And as regards his poetry, there are several things to be considered before a final judgment can be reached on his work. Chronology should be taken into account. The bulk of the poems used in the last chapter to illustrate the

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<sup>1</sup>Morse, Stearns. The Wholeness of Robert Frost. The Virginia Quarterly Review Vol. 19 no. 3: pp. 412-16 (July '43)





various aspects of Frost's morbid portrayal of New England life come from his first three volumes of poetry. They cannot, naturally, be considered representative of his entire out-put. When a man has published 7 books of poetry, three plays, and innumerable single poems, one would be rash indeed to judge him on only his earliest poetry; particularly in this case, when progression is so clearly evident in the poet's succeeding volumes.

As they wear onward, Frost's Collected Poems show an increasing self-complacency of poetic purpose: from the initial effort to write true things acceptable to his Muse (his wife) to writing good things acceptable to himself—no small achievement, since Frost is a hard man to please.<sup>2</sup>

That statement can say much or little, but it does indicate what the majority of readers find true of Frost's poetry—a progression of thought and treatment that will not permit of over-all judgments based only on his earliest poetry.

Yet in addition to this, and more to the point, are the many poems in the three early books which indicate a philosophy that is far from distorted and one-sided. A number of the poems proffered as examples in the forthcoming chapter are drawn from those early books. They speak for themselves.

Lay readers, and numerous critics who are in a position to know, find that Frost's presentation of New

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<sup>2</sup>"The Muse," Time, XXXIII (1939) 84-87. p. 84.





England life rings true. I hold it a very significant fact that in 1922 the Women's Clubs of Vermont elected to appoint him their Poet Laureate. Certainly a man who saw their way of life in a wholly unfavorable light, and who presented them as insane, emotionally unbalanced and mal-adjusted would not have been singled out for such honor. On the contrary, the Christian Science Monitor wrote of their choice:

The tribute from the women of Vermont comes as recognition of his insight and sympathy. Farmer's wives he understands—both their troubles and their joys. One people he has chosen to know well, to call them his own and through them to portray all human nature.<sup>3</sup>

When the ladies of a region can agree that some one poet has become their true voice, certainly that poet can lay claim to a portrayal of life that is whole and experiential. And Time called North of Boston a "book of people" so full of New England scenery and New England tones of voice that even foreigners could get the lay of the landscape and the hang of its inhabitants.<sup>4</sup>

In his genius for revealing universal human attributes within clearly delineated personalities, Frost evidences a fragment of the quality which has made Chaucer and Shakespeare immortal.

Almost without exception, the critics agree that

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<sup>3</sup>Lowell, Amy. Robert Frost: the man and his works. Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>"The Muse", Ibid. p. 83.





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Frost writes from experience. In the words of Russell

Blankenship:

He knows the life of a New England farmer...because he has lived it....He talks interestedly about...all the daily tasks of the New England farm, and in every reference and every syllable he gives evidence that he knows intimately what he is talking about....<sup>5</sup>

The majority of readers also acknowledge that though Frost writes of New England people, he is writing to a far larger audience than local New Englanders. Mark Van Doren stated this universality of appeal thus:

One need not have lived in New England to understand him. He has induced, it happens, a nostalgia for New England in persons who never saw the place...His voice is immediately recognizable anywhere as a human voice.<sup>6</sup>

Harriet Munro has added:

.....his art, plunging beneath surfaces and accidents, seizes upon the essential, the typical, in the relations of men and women with each other and with the earth, the sky, and all that lives and moves between them. Such art passes local boundaries as lightly as in an airplane, and swings out into wider circles of time and space.<sup>7</sup>

James Southall Wilson said, "he is individual in a universal sense."<sup>8</sup> And Mark Van Doren has expressed it also

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<sup>5</sup>American Literature, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 224.

<sup>6</sup>The American Scholar, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>7</sup>Poets and Their Art. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926. p. 56.

<sup>8</sup>Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol 7:2, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 243.





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in these further words:

Being a genuine poet he has written poems which are shrewd or wise or beautiful in themselves and which may be of interest to readers who know nothing of New England.<sup>9</sup>

G. R. Elliott suggested: "Mr. Frost has become more deeply representative than many poets who have set themselves at catching the spirit of our age."<sup>10</sup>

George F. Whicher spoke of Frost's characters as:

New Englanders still living in the native tradition, integers who thought for themselves and spoke their minds with humorous indirection...Behind the poetry is a way of living too deeply inbred to be denied, an instinct for completeness too human to be forgotten.<sup>11</sup>

John Haines: "He writes of New England farmers and their underlings much in the same way, and with the like insight as Wordsworth wrote of the Cumbrian 'statesmen' and cottagers...";<sup>12</sup> Sidney Cox, ~~who~~ stated: "Intense, imaginative sympathy suffuses Mr. Frost's poems of people."<sup>13</sup> James Southall Wilson: "They are never remembered as imagined but

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<sup>9</sup>The American Scholar, cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>The Nation. Vol 109:2840 pp. 713-15. Dec. 5, 1919. Cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 186.

<sup>11</sup>From The Amherst Record, Jyly 14, 1937. Cited by Thornton. p. 100.

<sup>12</sup>From the Gloucester Journal, Feb. 2, 1935. Cited by Thornton, Ibid. p. 96.

<sup>13</sup>From The New Republic, Vol. 12: 147, pp. 109-11, Aug. 25, 1917. Cited by Thornton, Ibid., p. 159.





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as actual people";<sup>14</sup> and Mark Van Doren, who remarked that Frost "has not dealt with them sentimentally nor...in the manner of a visitor to these communities who regards them as museums of odd characters and strange dialects."<sup>15</sup>

Giving Frost a hearing in all this comment on his characters, we read in "Brown's Descent":

.....Sometimes as an authority  
On motor-cars, I'm asked if I  
Should say our stock was petered out,  
And this is my sincere reply;

Yankees are what they always were.<sup>16</sup>

Frost seldom expresses his own opinion in his work; in fact, he has often seemed to be writing with his tongue in his cheek; yet the determined, short-spoken farmer in "Brown's Descent", appears to be his picture of Yankees as "they always were".

Coffin agrees that the people of New England are essentially sound: "Through these people of Frost's the essential New England has emerged at last, the tough and lasting New England. New England has always been more famous for making people than for making shoes and sheets. Now that the shoes and sheets have gone elsewhere to be made, the leading occupation of the place shows up more clearly....And

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<sup>14</sup>Virginia Quarterly Review. Cited by Thorndike p. 240.

<sup>15</sup>American and British Literature Since 1890. New York & London: The Century Co. 1925. p. 21.

<sup>16</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. pp. 174-175.





rightly and expertly put into poetry, these people, for all their sharp corners and crab-like ideas of going ahead backwards or sideways, become proper and universal common people. They have such toughness and lasting human nature in them.<sup>17</sup>

When the critics take on this problem of whether or not Frost gives a valid picture of life, their judgments are like the following:

Mr. Frost is as skilful a Symbolist as anyone, and his critics acknowledge that this is so; but the mystery in his poems is never of the sort which makes so many contemporary poems sound like puzzles. It is merely the mystery which there is in existence and which he has his own personal way of feeling. Just as his untrained readers have enjoyed hearing the voice of his verse because it is a singularly human voice, so they have enjoyed the additional and deeper layers of meaning which underlie the apparently simple pieces. It is not that nothing is clear. The surface is clear as daybreak. It is that the things which are unclear are the things which elsewhere in the world are unclear—in all our life, no less.<sup>18</sup>

As for the real problem of the conditions in present day New England and their significance in the life of the country people, Coffin has this to say.

Frost likes his people in individuals, not mass formation. He isn't blaming their troubles on the capitalists or the environment, but on the way life is built and the way they are built. It is a wider kind of idealism. And, anyway, troubles may be good for a man. Frost has found it so.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>New Poetry of New England: Robinson and Frost.  
p. 69.

<sup>18</sup>Mark Van Doren, cited by Thornton, page 10.

<sup>19</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 70.





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A good answer for those who cry "grim", "morbid", "sadistic", comes from Louis Untermeyer.

There is much that must make the mature poetry of Robert Frost seem determinedly grim, and this indeed is one of the favorite charges brought against his work. It is an easy generality, one that is difficult to dislodge; especially from the mind of those who, having uttered a theory, find it superfluous to prove it. The truth is that Frost is grim and he is also gay; he is matter-of-fact and extraordinarily fanciful—he is, in short, the many-mooded creature that most sensitive human beings are.<sup>20</sup>

Coffin speaks as a New Englander when he asserts the rock-bed reality of Frost's characters and enlarges on their attitude toward life.

Frost has caught them unawares. They are not, to use the very common idiom, people all dressed up with no place to go. They are in their old clothes and already there. They have places to live in, they are not visiting, as at the photographer's. They are at all sorts of work, not merely in a state of being, like Wordsworth's people, so often. They are totally unconscious both of their vigor and their democracy, unlike Whitman's citizens of "these states." .....Still, a lot of Frost's people are no better than they should be. Some are worse. Some of them are graceless and do not get ahead in the world, unless it is by burning down the house for the fire insurance and buying a telescope to study the stars. But unlike Robinson's people, they almost never brood or shut themselves away from life. They stay right in the middle of it. There are none of the loafers Whitman so admires. They are people who expect adversity and small potatoes and few in a hill.<sup>21</sup>

It is the hypothesis of this work that Frost presents much more than a lost New England. I, and persons much more learned than I, see solutions in him—salvation as Coffin puts

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<sup>20</sup>American Poetry Since 1900. p. 28.

<sup>21</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 65.





it. These solutions lie in everyday life. They are available to all who will take them.

As an over-all example of what Frost would say to his New England neighbors about living a whole, happy life, "The Times Table" furnishes us a convenient example. In it Frost criticizes those who do not have hope for the future. He sees the fault of pessimism and fatalism as a real cause of the threatening ills of northern New England--if people will take a whole view of life, and embrace it fully they can counteract the difficulties--otherwise, they encourage their own destruction.

More than half way up the pass  
Was a spring with a broken drinking glass,  
And whether the farmer drank or not  
His mare was sure to observe the spot  
By cramping the wheel on a water-bar,  
Turning her forehead with a star,  
And straining her ribs for a monster sigh;  
To which the farmer would make reply,  
'A sigh for every so many breath,  
And for every so many sigh a death.  
That's what I always tell my wife  
Is the multiplication table of life."  
The saying may be ever so true;  
But it's just the kind of a thing that you,  
Nor I, nor nobody else may say,  
Unless our purpose is doing harm,  
And then I know of no better way  
To close a road, abandon a farm,  
Reduce the births of the human race,  
And bring back nature in people's place.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 336.

<sup>24</sup>New England as New England. p. 70.





Hardly a consideration of Mr. Frost comes to the press without at least a mention of the poet's whimsy, wit, and dry Yankee humor. Critics, say what they will, admit his gift in this field. One of the few who find fault here is our eternal fault-finder, Miss Amy Lowell. She calls an example of Mr. Frost's work "a laborious attempt at humour. Mr. Frost is a kindly and genial poet, but he is never either whimsical or quaint....Mr. Frost give us no such delicious bits of humour as James Russell Lowell's:

We're curus critters: Now ain't jes' the minute  
That ever fits us easy while we're in it."<sup>23</sup>

But Robert Coffin has an answer for her when he writes of New England characters thus:

The older writers just didn't see their poetic possibilities. When they did use these people at all, it was for lighter poems and genre poems. They took the greatest pains to misspell their talk to make it look humorous. And the poets condescended, as Lowell in his Biglow Papers. That's one thing you can't do with men and women like these. It's the New England unpardonable sin.<sup>24</sup>

Mr. Coffin sees rather the real humor in Frost and the importance of that humor to the New Englander. It is a part of Frost's solution for New England's problem. It is an integral and necessary part of the New Englander's makeup.

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<sup>23</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. p. 125.

<sup>24</sup>New Poetry of New England, p. 70.





It is largely out of Frost's raw material for art, the human crudities, the lovable manifestations of rough-handed living, that one of the greatest of the strengths of Robert Frost has sprung. This is his humor. A saving sense of humor is most certainly one of his best rule-of-thumb guides to salvation. For with this poet, laughing is a serious matter, and it leads to the high levels of serenity. It is a thing of beauty just as surely as the hunger and thirst after belief. It is a law of life.<sup>25</sup>

Even the problems that seem the greatest tragedies need laughter once in a while to take the sting out of them. Frost can laugh at the spectacle of man's inability to people the wilderness...."So he explains the name of Still Corners in his poem New Hampshire—the name comes, not from silence or whiskey, but from the fact that the place is still just a crossroads, still corners in the woods."<sup>26</sup>

Frost believes in laughter for his own everyday living. Anyone who has ever heard him lecture will bear me out in that. This tonic that is an answer for his friends in the mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont has real meaning for his own life. A lady who knew him in the years at Pinkerton Academy writes of having had this experience with him:

One late afternoon I saw a most wonderful sunset as I looked from the chapel window at school. Anxious to have someone share the beauty before me, I called Mr. Frost and our librarian to enjoy the gorgeous display. I thought that my fellow workers did not show the proper amount of enthusiasm and I told them so quite emphatically.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid. p. 140.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p. 20.





The next morning, as I sat at my desk, Mr. Frost dropped before me the following lines written in pencil upon a sheet of yellow school paper.

An A No. 1 Sundown

(Written by request.)

Miss Clark gave a sunset party  
At a western window in Chapel,  
And because our delight wasn't hearty,  
Or we couldn't find words to grapple  
With the ravishing skyscape before us,  
Miss Clark got as mad as a taurus.  
She appealed to the innate calf in us  
If the gold wasn't here diaphanous,  
There hard and metallic and glittering.  
Then maddened still more by tittering  
At her words diaphanous, metallic,  
She called us dolichocephalic  
And everything awful but feminine;  
Said she wouldn't have nobody run down,  
Or in any way squeeze a lemon in,  
Her beautiful A One Sundown.<sup>27</sup>

Frost often laughs at himself. When others learn that trick from him, they will have gone far to alleviate their personal ills. Even as a farmer, he can look at agricultural calamity with a chuckle. "In Time of Cloudburst" he says:

Let the downpour roil and toil!  
The worst it can do to me  
Is carry some garden soil  
A little nearer the sea.  
. . . . .  
Then all I need do is run  
To the other end of the slope,  
And on tracts laid new to the sun,  
Begin all over to hope.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Sylvia Clark, "Robert Frost--The Derry Years," The New Hampshire Troubadour XVI (1946) 12-15. p. 15.

<sup>28</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 369.





Frost is far from the chronic penny-pincher who lets New England stringencies make amiser of him.

The Hardship of Accounting

Never ask of money spent  
Where the spender thinks it went.  
Nobody was ever meant  
To remember or invent  
What he did with every cent.<sup>29</sup>

Coffin mentions a poem of Frost's that is a widespread favorite for humor and gentle satire. "In the lightest of Frost's moments enough seriousness can come suddenly in to set him mind working as well as his belly. I say belly, because Frost believes in having some of his laughs start that low. A laugh with Frost can go a long ways. It can go high enough to touch even the totalitarian state. There is his poem "Departmental":<sup>30</sup>

An ant on the table cloth  
Ran into a dormant moth  
Of many times his size.  
He showed not the least surprise.  
His business wasn't with such.  
He gave it scarcely a touch,  
And was off on his duty run.  
Yet if he encountered one  
Of the hive's enquiry squad  
Whose work is to find out God  
And the nature of time and space,  
He would put him onto the case.  
Ants are a curious race;  
One crossing with hurried tread  
The body of one of their dead  
Isn't given a moment's arrest—  
Seems not even impressed.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid. p. 408/

<sup>30</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 56.





But he no doubt reports to any  
 With whom he crosses antennae,  
 And they no doubt report  
 To the higher up at court.  
 Then word goes forth in Formic:  
 'Death's come to Jerry McCormic,  
 Our selfless forager Jerry.  
 Will the special Janizary  
 Whose office it is to bury  
 The dead of the commissary  
 Go bring him home to his people.  
 Lay him in state on a sepal.  
 Wrap him for shroud in a petal.  
 Embalm him with ichor of nettle.  
 This is the word of your Queen.'  
 And presently on the scene  
 Appears a solemn mortician;  
 And taking formal position  
 With feelers calmly atwiddle,  
 Seizes the dead by the middle,  
 And heaving him high in air,  
 Carries him out of there.  
 No one stands round to stare.  
 It is nobody else's affair.

It couldn't be called ungentle.  
 But how thoroughly departmental.<sup>31</sup>

Frost's touch is light and sure. Many are the chuckles in this poem just cited, and indeed, throughout his poetry. The humorous poems do not permit of the dissecting analytical treatment we gave the more serious ones—they would lose much of their intangible appeal in the process, and really need and deserve to be presented in their entirety.

Brown's Descent is another good for just pure fun. Of course, Farmer Brown's predicament wasn't an enviable one, but Frost has described his slide over the icy crust in such

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<sup>31</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 372-3/





a provoking manner that one can barely refrain from out-right laughter. One cannot but feel that the hapless farmer would have agreed that his position was really a very funny one, and that he probably had a good laugh about it himself when he got back home.

Brown lived at such a lofty farm  
That everyone for miles could see  
His lantern when he did his chores  
In winter after half-past three.

And many must have seen him make  
His wild descent from there one night,  
'Cross lots, 'cross walls, 'cross everything,  
Describing rings of lantern light.

Between the house and barn the gale  
Got him by something he had on  
And blew him out on the icy crust  
That cased the world, and he was gone!

Walls were all buried, trees were few:  
He saw no stay unless he stove  
A hole in somewhere with his heel  
But though repeatedly he strove

And stamped and said things to himself,  
And sometimes something seemed to yield,  
He gained no foothold, but pursued  
His journey down from field to field.

Sometimes he came with arms outspread  
Like wings, revolving in the scene  
Upon his longer axis, and  
With no small dignity of mien.

Faster or slower as he chanced,  
Sitting or standing as he chose,  
According as he feared to risk  
His neck, or thought to spare his clothes,

He never let the lantern drop.  
And some exclaimed who saw afar  
The figures he described with it,  
'I wonder what those signals are





Brown makes at such an hour of night!  
 He's celebrating something strange.  
 I wonder if he's sold his farm,  
 Or been made Master of the Grange.'

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked:  
 He fell and made the lantern rattle  
 (But saved the light from going out.)  
 So half-way down he fought the battle,

Incredulous of his own bad luck.  
 And then becoming reconciled  
 To everything, he gave it up  
 And came down like a coasting child.

'Well—I-be—' that was all he said,  
 As standing in the river road,  
 He looked back up the slippery slope  
 (Two miles it was) to his abode.

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But now he snapped his eyes three times;  
 Then shook his lantern, saying 'He's  
 'Bout out!' and took the long way home  
 By road, a matter of several miles.<sup>32</sup>

It's a prize for many a chuckle. The vignettes of  
 Brown hurtling down the hillside are calculated to tickle the  
 most staid. Who now would call Frost grim?

"A Hundred Collars" is another of the longer poems  
 that's good for laughter. A "great man," late of small town  
 Lancaster, was forced to share a hotel room with an unknown.  
 The occupant of the room had no understanding of the "great  
 man's" finer sensibilities, and jabbered on in his drunken  
 state about all of his life and job. The best joke came when  
 the talker generously proffered a hundred of his yout-grown

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid. p. 173-5.





collars to the trembling "great man"--never realizing that he had more of earthly goods than he needed already, and surely had no desire for this man's left-overs.

Frost is laughing here at the 'home town boy who made good' and who thereby lost his ability to talk with his own people. The "great man" of the story had become a scholar, but his knowledge was no help in getting him through an unpleasant situation in the hotel room. He had lost his ability to be human, to be supple in meeting the extingencies of life.

There is another poem in which Frost turns to laugh at himself. He has held on to an old, old pair of shoes because they have special meaning for him. The poem strikes one as a chuckle over his idiosyncrasy and about the joke of spanning the country in one stride, the while presenting an allegory of Frost's true place in our literary nation.

#### A Record Stride

In a Vermont bedroom closet  
With a door of two broad boards  
And for backwall a crumbling old chimney  
(And that's what their toes are towards),

I have a pair of shoes standing,  
Old rivals of sagging leather,  
Who once kept surpassing each other,  
But now live even together.

They listen for me in the bedroom  
To ask me a thing or two  
About who is too old to go walking,  
With too much stress on the who.





I wet one last year at Montauk  
For a hat I had to save.  
The other I wet at the Cliff House  
In an extra-vagrant wave.

Two entirely different grandhildren  
Got me into my double adventure.  
But when they grow up and can read this  
I hope they won't takeit for censure.

I touch my tongue to the shoes now  
And unless my sense is at fault,  
On one I can taste Atlantic,  
On the other Pacific, salt.

One foot in each great ocean  
Is a record stride or stretch.  
The authentic shoes it was made in  
I should sell for what they would fetch.

But instead I proudly devote them  
To my museum and muse;  
So the thick-skins needn't act thin-skinned  
About being past-active shoes.

And I ask all to try to forgive me  
For being as over-elated  
Asif I had measured the country  
And got the United States stated.<sup>33</sup>

Though not of New England background, certainly  
worthy of mention is Frost's recent drama, <sup>A</sup>~~The~~ Masque of Reason.  
Most noteworthy for its philosophy, it has yet such a  
prevadingly humorous touch that no consideration of the work  
omits mention of this quality. Newsweek's review, "Jehovah,  
Saten and the Jobs" notes that "A Masque of Reason is a satire,  
metaphysical in concept, on the Book of Job; Witty and wise  
as anything Frost has written, on the surface it is little

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<sup>33</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 381-2.





more than a conversation between the ancient sufferer Job, his wife, Satan and God."<sup>34</sup> Whicher writes of it in the Yale Review that "underlying the playfulness that is a constant feature of Frost's poetic thought is a bedrock of serious meditation."<sup>35</sup> The play must really be read in its entirety to get the full impact of the humor, but a few of the best remarks are:

Job's wife -- I have a protest I would lodge with You.  
I want to ask You if it stands to reason  
That women prophets should be burned as witches  
Whereas men prophets are received with honor.<sup>36</sup>

. . . . .

Job's wife If I said once I said a thousand times,  
Don't scratch! And when, as rotten as his skin,  
His tents blew all to pieces, I picked up  
Enough to build him every night a pup tent  
Around him so it wouldn't touch and hurt him.  
I did my wifely duty.<sup>37</sup>

. . . . .

God I saw you had no fondness for committees.  
Next time you find yourself pressed on to one  
For the revision of the Book of Prayer  
Put that in if it isn't in already:  
Deliver us from committees. 'Twill remind me.  
I would do anything for you in reason.<sup>38</sup>

. . . . .

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<sup>34</sup>Newsweek XXV April 2, 1945, 100-2. p. 100.

<sup>35</sup>Yale Review XXXIV(1945) 549-51. p. 550.

<sup>36</sup>A Masque of Reason New York: Henry Holt and Company 1945. p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. p. 18-19.





God What are (your wife's) interests, Job?

Job Witch-women's rights.  
 Humor her there or she will be confirmed  
 In her suspicion You're no feminist.  
 You have it in for women, she believes.  
 Kipling invokes You as Lord God of Hosts.  
 She'd like to know how You would take a prayer  
 That started off Lord God of Hostesses.<sup>39</sup>

It seems to this writer that in this whole section the culling out of these examples has detracted somewhat from the flavor and quality of their humor. Could it be that we need to happen upon Frost's humor just as it asserts itself in the very process of his writing? Perhaps it does its best work when seen as a part of the whole, just as it is a part of life. Carving it out of its environment takes the chuckle out of it somehow. It needs to pop up among the sad things in life to achieve its full value.

'Laughter is the best medicine', but not the only curative, certainly. Another remedy that Frost poses for successful living is one that any psychologist will recommend—absorption and satisfaction in one's work. Particularly are the types of labor that country life affords, and the setting for that labor, valuable for the man who would find meaning and value in living. Coffin put it beautifully when he said:

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid. p. 10.





Going for water, plowing and seeding, mowing, rolling apples down into a cellar, gathering leaves—homely and common everyday chores are rituals of lovely and loyal living that make a man feel so good that he forgets about trouble and sorrow and the dying he must come to some day. Tasks of day to day, year to year; but also life to life ones.<sup>40</sup>

Here again Frost is writing out of his own experience. He was the young man whom Amy Lowell described as "working from morning till night to tear a living out of the thin soil."<sup>41</sup> Yet she is also speaking of Frost when she writes of "The Pasture": "Here in a few words is an upland pasture with the farmer at work in it, and here is that tenderness, that love of place and people which marks all that this poet does."<sup>42</sup>

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf  
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.<sup>43</sup>

Miss Lowell also suspects that a great many of the poems in his published books would seem to date from the Derry period of his farming life, if not in actual writing,

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<sup>40</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 53.

<sup>41</sup>Robert Frost, The Man and His Work. p. 3.

<sup>42</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. p. 105.

<sup>43</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 1.





certainly in substance. Such poems as "Mowing," "Mending Wall," "After Apple-picking," "Putting in Seed" and a number of others, are written by one who has been in the places described, and doing the things here done. "This is not the work of a mere observer, but of a man who has lived what he writes about":<sup>44</sup>

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
 And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
 What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;  
 Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
 Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound--  
 And that was why it whispered and did not speak.  
 It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
 Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:  
 Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak  
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,  
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers  
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.  
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.  
 My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.<sup>45</sup>

This point of finding peace and satisfaction in manual labor among the lovely things in Nature has been seen as a distinguishing point about the northern New England farmer. "The very sensitive, aristocratic New Englander is fast disappearing or has fallen on evil days. He is a man who has culture for his blood almost, he must always live out of books as well as out of the earth, and must constantly work to improve himself. But the other old-stock New Englander survives, in all his vigor and toughness. He is the sturdy New Englander who never expected too much, and so was never disappointed, who worked himself into his woods and stonewalls and barns. He

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<sup>44</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. p. 92.

<sup>45</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 25.





stands up now with his feet solidly planted on his ledges, just as tall as ever he was, and keeps an eye on the weather and on men's ways. And he is a well man."<sup>46</sup>

At one time Frost says out-right:

Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself  
Until it can contain itself no more,  
But sweating-full, drips wine and oil a little.<sup>47</sup>

And he speaks in this same poem of the love of the land that this work engenders:

Needless to say to you, my argument  
Is not to lure the city to the country.  
Let those possess the land and only those,  
Who love it with a love so strong and stupid  
That they may be abused and taken advantage of  
And made fun of by business, law and art;  
They still hang on.<sup>48</sup>

Another poem that completely illustrates this answer that is Frost's and many men's is one already mentioned—"Putting in Seed". There is such sweetness in this work that it is all he can do to tear himself away. 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.'<sup>49</sup>

You come to fetch me from my work to-night  
When supper's on the table, and we'll see  
If I can leave off burying the white  
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree

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<sup>46</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 49.

<sup>47</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 428.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid. p. 427.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid. p. 25.





(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,  
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)   
And go along with you ere you lose sight  
Of what you came for and become like me,  
Slave to a springtime passion for the earth.  
How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed  
On through the watching for that early birth  
When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes  
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, and closely related to this last that we have been considering, there is the solution that Frost finds in Nature. Frost waves away the title of 'nature poet', but it would seem that much of his answer lies in that very realm. A critic sees an answer to this paradox.

It is hard to separate Frost's nature from human nature, his flowers and trees and apples from people, even stubble-scarred apples from people. He says the same thing himself. He insists constantly that he is not a nature poet. He calls himself a poet of people. All nature is related to them. Not they to it, as is the way with Wordsworth. He deals with people in the state of nature best—state of good nature, I am always tempted to add, remembering Frost's determination—it amounts to that—to see the good points about people rather than their bad. So New England secretiveness is mixed in with blueberries, and a man who keeps quiet about where the big blueberries grow is forgiven the sin of covetousness for the blueberries sake. Wall-mending becomes a sermon in neighborliness. A plain farmer gets mixed up with the stars when he takes up a cooled meteor to build into his wall. Frost's particulars everywhere run out to great universals.<sup>51</sup>

Frost's Nature is real, vivid. An image in a poem

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid. p. 72.

<sup>51</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 59.





can take you right out of your surroundings to the very situation he is describing. How apt is his description of an April day, particularly at this time of year.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.  
 You know how it is with an April day  
 When the sun is out and the wind is still,  
 You're one month on in the middle of May.  
 But if you so much as dare to speak,  
 A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,  
 A wind comes off a frozen peak,  
 And you're two months back in the middle of March.<sup>52</sup>

And another stanza from this poem that has so very much of Spring as an integral part of its worth and beauty:

The water for which we may have to look  
 In summertime with a witching-wand,  
 In every wheelrut's now a brook,  
 In every print of a hoof a pond.  
 Be glad of water, but don't forget  
 The lurking frost in the earth beneath  
 That will steal forth after the sun is set  
 And show on the water its crystal teeth.<sup>53</sup>

These things are all about us, but we need someone to help us see them. A fellow poet and New Englander has said of Frost:

This farmer has a pair of new eyes. And this man's eyes saw the exquisite patterns of rightness in the simplest thing he was doing, setting up the stones in a wall, maybe, or cleaning out last year's leaves from a spring. I know that kind of spring. My father had one on his farm. It is a barrel set in the ground without a bottom, and birch leaves gather clusters of diamonds on their edges where they lie underwater, and a moonstone rounds up in the bottom where the water bubbles up. Maybe another jewel hangs in the air, without a thread, where a dragonfly hovers. Robert Frost reminded me that was a poem. And the young calf that tottered when his mother

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<sup>52</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 357.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. p. 358.





licked him with her tongue!—That was another good one, a sight so common and comforting as that is forever new. The times I had picked blueberries and not known I was kneeling in poetry! I had seen the morning dewdrops clustered up along with the blueberry leaves and berries, but I never had known they were such a beautiful sight as this:

The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves,  
Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves.<sup>54</sup>

Frost seems peculiarly influenced by Nature. One critic notes that though at one time he worked in a mill, yet there is not a single mill throughout his poems, while every wild flower picked in his rambles was photographed on his heart with the accuracy born of passion.<sup>55</sup>

Frost finds answers to the questions of life. He finds them in a new awareness of nature and human nature, in local loveliness, in a fresh wonder at the world. "He finds the answers in a new testament of neighborliness, in the kinship of men. He finds absolutes in slight things: a crow's wing shakes snow down on him from a limb and that makes up for a lost day."<sup>56</sup>

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 52.

<sup>55</sup>Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. p. 84.

<sup>56</sup>New Poetry of New England. p. 109.

<sup>57</sup>Collected Poems of Robert Frost. p. 270.





## CHAPTER IV

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary: A consideration of Frost's poetry from the viewpoint of the tragic and terrible offers a copious amount of material that deals with just this area. We see a woman who has to cope with lonely surroundings, a trace of insanity in her family, and lack of understanding in her husband— a woman who is having but poor success in straightening out the tangled threads of her life. We see another woman in somewhat like circumstance, who has let her child's death estrange her from her husband and from everything good in life. A third woman has stepped outside the moral bounds and consequently lives in constant fear of discovery. Then we have seen two men, one an example, the other a mourner, of the dismal fact of the desertion of some parts of New England by her youth. Next in the sad picture is the family who have let their economic need be an excuse for presuming on the rights of others and the tenets of good neighborliness. Next are two men who are completely out of the ordinary—one who cares nothing for his farm, all for a study of the stars; and the other who cares nothing for anything, only for his solitude. These two would be mis-fits in any 'society'. Another mis-fit is the man who lets race prejudice and self-esteem be





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justification for murder. More deserving of sympathy is the aged hired man who never realizes 'why he isn't quite as good as anybody'. Equally sad is the young wife who cannot bear the loneliness of a hill farm and lets her imaginings drive her to insanity. Most tragic of all is the youngster who dies at the saw-rig because they didn't "call it a day, by giving him the half hour that a boy counts so much when saved from work."

Yet the evidence for an opposite viewpoint is equally conclusive. We read a poem which directly admonishes the man who takes a dismal, pessimistic view of life. We are offered innumerable delightful pieces that make laughter the catharsis it should be. Frost writes jokingly about experiences that someone else would grumble over—petty displeasure in another person, agricultural calamity, money worries. He can use an allegory nimbly in representing the bureaucracy that is an ill of our nation from the capitol down to the small New England town. Frost can turn a mis-hap like a slide down a hill-side on the ice into a sketch that will be eternally funny. He can make a human failing, for example pride in new-found greatness, seem the foolishness that it is. He sees the joke in his own idiosyncrasies and makes no bones about kidding himself about them. He can treat a serious subject seriously and still inject enough humor to make it delightful and yet not objectionable—as we have seen in his treatment of the story of Job. For a broader solution to





life's ills than just humor, we find work—work that Frost finds completely self-rewarding—jobs like cleaning the pasture spring, mowing beside the wood, toiling with the soil, putting in seed. This work engenders in farming men "a love so strong and stupid that they may be abused and taken advantage of and made fun of by business, law and art; they still hang on." Lastly, Frost gives us what we need so much to see and appreciate—the wondrous beauty that is all about us in Nature. The variabilities and beauties of an April day, the tenderness of a calf and its mother, the poetry in blueberries—these are things we would miss without Frost's help. He teaches that some small beautiful thing in Nature can cheer us and salvage a day that would otherwise have been sad.

Conclusion: To the critics who consider Frost's characters the last fragments of a bygone civilization, this much must be granted: that some of his people have lost their incentive to pull out of their difficulties, have settled into complacency over, or subjection to the problems that face them. This, needless to say, is a condition not restricted to northern New England. Many of the tragedies are tragedies that could happen to anyone, anywhere. The problems Frost writes of are universally human—accentuated in some cases by environmental influences, but nonetheless all universal.

The physical environment of northern New England does not permit of any immediate solution to New England's





problem, but there is much that can be done about the social environment, and Frost proffers concrete things to do. He sees that there must be difficult things in life, anywhere, but he would not have us think that this is all-important. He is psychologist and philosopher, preacher and doctor. He knows the ways that people can find happiness in life, and he shows us people who have found this happiness through his poems, just as he shows that he has found it for himself.





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